

THE BREAKFAST BOOK CLUB: A SERIES OF REFLECTIONS

by

Erin Renee Muir

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Approved by:

Benjamin Powell, Ph.D., Thesis Director

Sara Zimmerman, Ph.D., Second Reader

Linda Pacifici, Ph.D., Third Reader

Ted Zerucha, Ph.D., Interim Director, The Honors College

Abstract

My thesis project is a social impact project focused on underprivileged, Spanish speaking, elementary school students. The project is called Breakfast Book Club and has, as of December 2016, received a \$2,000 grant from the Clinton Global Initiative through Appalachian State. Breakfast Book Club is a book club focused on students in the Hardin Park Elementary school district, specifically the Bradford Park area. The purpose of this thesis project was to reach out to underprivileged in the community with resources (free books), homework help, actual language practice, and relationships outside the home (with volunteers). Herein lies the weekly reflections, including goals, improvements, and adaptations that marked the process of running the book club.

The Breakfast Book Club: A Series of Reflections

Beginning from a grant received through the Clinton Global Initiative, Breakfast Book Club has taken roots in Boone, North Carolina as an after school club offered once per week at a trailer park in Bradford Park. The club is made possible through the generosity of Kaleidoscope in partnership with Mt. Vernon Baptist Church.

The project consisted of 6 half-hour sessions over the course of spring 2017. I headed up the project including planning, recruiting volunteers, advertising to participants, designing material, and scheduling the time and location. The project is a personal response to the gap in academic performance that has been shown between English Language Learners and their English speaking fellow students. Through discussions with the ESL teacher at Hardin Park, Jack Hellenbrand, I chose a book club as an opportunity for ELL's to gain further exposure to English in a less structured way (outside of school) AND close to their homes.

Vision: We envision a world in which English-as-a-second language does not prove a barrier to education or academic advancement and children of all income brackets receive the equal academic empowerment.

Mission: We aim to offer additional exposure to the English language, to instill confidence and excitement with regards to education and to invest wholeheartedly in elementary-age students who do not speak English at home.

Website: <https://muirer4.wixsite.com/leonc-bbc>

Tuesday, February 28, 2017

Today's club was the first, and it was so much fun! I am even more excited for the next several weeks. We didn't have even close to as many kids as I had planned on (about 20). There were only 7 kids at the Lighthouse when we got there, but all of them did participate. They were enthusiastic and excited to meet us.

We started off by introducing ourselves and having all the kids and Kaleidoscope volunteers introduce themselves. Then we handed out the reading interest survey and had the kids fill it out and then trade it in for a cereal bowl and spoon. We served the cereal and chatted a little bit.

I introduced the "New Word Box." Throughout the reading, the kids could write down words they didn't know on tiny post-its and put them in one compartment of the box, and for each word they put in, they could take a starburst out of the other compartment. Each week, we will go over the words they put in the box the previous week. I created the New Word Box to encourage kids to admit when they don't know words in a way that rewards them instead of embarrassing them.

After all the cereal was served, we handed out the books. The kids were thrilled to have them and love the bright colors on the cover. They took special care to write their names (and some wrote all the personal information they knew about themselves) in the first couple pages. At this point, I began reading Chapter 1 while the kids ate cereal. I stopped every couple pages to ask a question, like, "have you ever seen a skunk like Mateo did?" We would have a brief (1-2 minute) discussion and then dive back into the reading.

The kids were timid to write words they didn't know at first, but I could tell they wanted the candy. By the time Trevor (a volunteer) began reading Chapter 2, the kids had finished the cereal and, after a little bit of prodding, began to turn in words they didn't know. Once they got started, they couldn't stop. I think it was good for the younger kids to stay entertained picking out words they didn't know because, honestly, I don't think they could keep up reading themselves. It was better for them to have the option to do the little word box activity while they listened. The older kids read closely along with us and occasionally submitted a word.

We read together for about 15 minutes of the time, and, upon reaching Chapter 3, we finished for the day. The kids were full of energy and not quite ready for us to leave.

Things I did not expect:

1. The high level of engagement – these kids were very excited to be there and did not get bored even throughout what felt like a long while of reading.
2. The heavy use of the New Word Box. I just picked it up this afternoon after my second readers recommended that we find a way to talk about words the kids don't know.
3. Time was very limiting. I was a little worried that we would not take up a whole thirty minutes, but we were pushing it to stay under thirty minutes and may need to extend the time frame especially when we bring the craft into play.
4. The room was small. We were pretty cramped by the time we had seven kids and four volunteers, plus the Kaleidoscope volunteers.

Things I would like to improve:

1. I would love to get more kids in the door. After seeing how much these kids liked Breakfast Book Club, it would be great for them to share it with their friends and see more kids have the same reaction.
2. During the reading, I saw kids lose their track of what page we were on when they would put it down to write a word. I'm going to get a "Pagefinder," some kind of cool toy to sit on the table so that when someone loses their place, they can grab it off the table to let the reader know. Then the reader can break soon and tell everyone where to start from.
3. The address on the flyers is actually off by several houses. I didn't zoom in enough when I checked the address on the maps and the address is for another trailer also titled "lighthouse" that is just down the street. I think it must have been an extension, but either way it was wrong. Next week, we will have a volunteer outside of that trailer to send any kids up to the one we are meeting in.
4. I'd like to have more time, especially when we incorporate the crafts. Thirty minutes is extremely short when it comes down to it. Deb said that once the kids are more invested and engaged, 45 minutes may be a more do-able time.
5. This problem has already been solved, but the space was pretty tight, so next week, we'll be meeting in the bigger room.

Things I think went well:

1. Engagement – the kids loved BBC! I'm excited to see them again next week.
2. Cereal – this was a big part of why they loved it; the cereal was fun and exciting for how simple and low-budget it is.

3. The book – from the colorful covers to the story of a boy who sees skunks stealing his sister's trike, the book felt like a good choice today, although the vocabulary was definitely above many of the kids' levels.

4. The volunteers – they were on time, helpful, and chatted with the kids, although, I think they will definitely be more comfortable next time.

Tuesday, March 7, 2017

This week was the second week at Breakfast Book Club. We had 4 volunteers and myself in attendance and 7 students. This week we began with the words of the week—a list compiled of words that were put in the word box during the previous week alongside definitions for each word that I got from the Merriam-Webster Learner's Dictionary. When I originally compiled the list, I realized that a lot of the kids had trouble spelling the words that they didn't understand, so several of the slips of paper didn't necessarily spell any specific words at all. It's hard to keep everyone paying attention when we are just reading off a list of definitions so I gave examples that incorporated students or various objects in the room. After cereal was served and words were read, we settled into our reading. I started, handing off the reading to two other volunteers. Those volunteers who weren't reading sat with the younger kids to make sure they spelled their words right when they put them in the box. This was my solution to the problem that had apparently occurred the previous week. We also incorporated an Appalachian State foam squiggly noodle thing that I once got at a parade. It became the "Pagefinder" and sat on the table during the reading. As students lost their places to write words or whatever it may be, they would pick it up to silently let the reader know that they had lost their place in the reading. The reader would stop at the end of the line or paragraph to tell everyone where they were on the page/in the book. It proved an effective improvement from the first week's chaos as kids lost their places.

We read for about 15 minutes. I figure much longer won't really maintain the kids' attention. Some of them have already read ahead. One of them finished the book

entirely. I love seeing their excitement about reading, but I do think we are losing a little bit of momentum as is to be expected after the high from the first week.

Things I would like to improve:

1. This is kind of a result from last week that trickled into this week, but we needed to find a way for kids to submit words to the words box that I can read. Already solved this problem though by having volunteers kind of watch over their shoulders.
2. There was a lot of excitement about the Pagefinder this week to the extent that I think a couple kids were losing their places just to get to pick it up. I think time may just improve this as they get used to it and it becomes less exciting.

Things I think went well:

1. We had the same number of students come, so I would consider that success despite the lack of numeric improvement.
2. Although the pagefinder was distracting, it was very effective.

Tuesday, March 21, 2017

We took last week off due to Spring Break.

This week we were all a little tired personally, but brought a lot of energy to the room which just turned into chaos at first. The kids were eager to guess our names and get them right so we started by letting them do that and introducing our new volunteer.

Again this week, we had 4 volunteers and myself along with the 6 kids.

Excited to be back, the kids were jumping all around as we tried to go over the words of the week. I think we had too many. It was extremely hard for them to pay attention to the words of the week. This may have been in part due to a lack of verbal engagement requested from the volunteer reading.

After reading through the words and definitions and pouring cereal as we did so, we launched into our reading for the remaining fifteen minutes. I had three volunteers rotate through the reading while the others of us helped kids write words and submit them to the box.

Around half past four, we finished the reading and introduced the project we plan to start next week. I asked if the kids had ever thought of writing a book one day. A couple said they already were writing a book! Next week, we'll start building giant book covers for the book ideas they have come up with.

Things I would like to improve:

1. We definitely had too many words to maintain attention. Next week, I think I need to pick 5 words which were put in the word box by multiple people and just do that.

2. I'm not sure we read long enough because there were so few words. Some of the kids were disappointed they didn't have more time to find words they didn't know.

Things I think went well:

1. We still had the same number, so that means no one is leaving.
2. Good level of excitement and engagement.

Tuesday, March 28, 2017

This week we began with words of the week. I had only pulled the 5 most-submitted words instead of all of them. Having less words meant the kids paid attention the whole time because it was so much shorter. They are still less involved in this part of the session because of how high energy they are, especially when excited. This week we had 4 volunteers and five kids.

We poured cereal and carried on general discussion with the kids. I think the volunteers are finally comfortable and that makes a big difference. There's a better flow this week than there has been in the past. We started reading by quarter after and read until half past. The pagefinder is an effective tool now that the excitement of the foam noodle has worn off.

After we finished reading, we pulled out the craft supplies and I explained what we would be doing. I told them that we would be decorating the boxes as if they were our own giant books. Everyone got to create an idea for a book and then decorate the cover. We took the bags of cereal out of the boxes and gave each kid a box. The kids loved working on the boxes. They were crazy about the sparkle sticker paper and the glitter glue. Well, all but one. Alexander didn't have an idea for a book and despite the more masculine craft supplies (sport stickers, darker colors, etc.), he was stressing about the craft. While the others began covering their boxes with stickers and construction paper and writing out titles, he sat with one of our volunteers and tried to come up with an idea. Nothing seemed good enough to him. We did our best to encourage him. He didn't get it together, but eventually left crying. That was hard to watch. The kaleidoscope

volunteers tried to convince him to try the craft, but he felt like he just didn't have any good ideas so he abstained.

We finally got to sit and have good conversations with the kids, learn what they're interested in by the way they chose to cover their boxes. I brought a speaker this week so we could listen to Disney music while we worked. They were all full of opinions about who the best Disney princess is and why. I was just glad we finally felt like we were all jiving.

While I was in the kitchen getting some paper towels, I ran into Deb. She said that the following week the kids would be on a field trip so Breakfast Book Club couldn't happen on Tuesday. However, she implored me to bring volunteers a different day that week. She expressed how much it means to the kids. She said they look forward to it all week and she'd hate for them to miss a week. I told her I would see what I can do. She even offered for her volunteers to help me if only I could come a different day the next week. Around quarter to 5, we began cleaning up and set the boxes up on a shelf to dry. The kids thanked us as we left. They always do.

Things I would like to improve:

1. I'd like to have the kids who want to read out loud do so. Andrea, one of my volunteers suggested this.
2. I wish I had had them come up with a book idea first, and then work on creating a design. Having given them the supplies, they just did the boxes however they wanted and then thought of a book title they felt was fitting. It kind of defeated the purpose of the project.

Thing I think went well:

1. Yay! We finally broke the walls a little bit and conversation is more fluid. We don't feel like strangers anymore.
2. They loved decorating the boxes which I thought could be hit or miss, and was concerned it would just be miss.

Wednesday, April 5, 2017

Today was a little odd. Maybe we were all off our game simply because it was a different day of the week. Anahi was out for a doctor appointment and neither of the boys cared to come which was sad.

We started with words of the week per usual, but there was a lot less energy today than in the past. We only had myself and two other volunteers because we had to meet on a Wednesday due to the kids' schedule. For that reason, I think both we and the kids were less excited for some reason.

We read words of the week, poured cereal, and began the reading. Some of the Kaleidoscope volunteers commenting things like, "why didn't we have this when we were kids?" That's always good to hear. This week, I asked if any of the kids wanted to read aloud. Both Sandybelle and Andrea did. They read aloud very well, although they were quiet. We get through a lot less of the material when they read, but I think it's a worthy trade off. Andrea would occasionally stop at a hard word and look at me for help. I'd say it for her, she'd repeat it and continue. After each girl read a page or two, the whole room would clap or snap to show encouragement. Because there were less of us, we were able to have more one-on-one conversations and there was a lot less noise in the room.

Around half past, we continued on the boxes. This is the kids' new favorite part, possibly more-so than the cereal. Their boxes are coming along. Most have titles now and the front is completely covered. Some are working on the back already.

Things I would like to improve:

1. Volunteer energy level. I know it's hard, especially on a day we aren't used to giving up to the club, but if we don't bring the energy, there may not be any.
2. I want the boys to come back! I don't know why they left, but I would assume it has to do with their short attention spans.

Things I think went well:

1. We are really getting to know the girls. Sandybelle tells us about how not cool people at school make her feel, and we try to encourage her to disregard their opinions.
2. The projects are coming along and looking really cute.

Tuesday, April 11, 2017

It's our last week...I'm so bummed! Today, the weather is sunny and 70. They were so excited to see us. They began telling us, all at once, about how they are going to show us their fort today since it's our last week. We told them we'd see it after book club. We asked the kids if they'd like to meet inside or outside. Outside, we met. The boys came back this week and we had all but Anahi. She was inside, doing homework. She had too much left and had to finish it before she could come to book club. She was pretty upset and I felt bad. I didn't want to be causing problems for the Kaleidoscope group or for Anahi. Deb asked me if I could take her some cereal and encourage her. She said it would mean a lot coming from me to know that she was still supported and we would miss her but were glad she was finishing her work. She had finished the book two weeks prior on her own anyways. I took her her cereal of choice and crouched down beside her at the table inside. I tried to encourage her and tell her how capable she is. She's a really smart one. They all are.

Outside, we read our five words of the week, poured cereal, and began reading. I started, but let the girls read a page or two each. Andrea had a couple specific pages she had practiced and wanted to read aloud. We of course, allowed it. The boys stayed and read, not becoming too distracted. This week, Gabriela read. We all knew it was the last week and that probably encouraged her.

After reading a chapter together, it was time to break out the craft supplies and finish our book boxes. We all got them out and sat with the kids working on them. Jonathan and Alexander immediately requested to have boxes as well. We gave them some and

helped them try to catch up in their décor. Once again, it was cool to sit with them and talk and help them tape and glue and write all over their boxes. They are so creative. I hope they know that.

It was almost time for them to go, so we cleaned up all of our craft supplies. I asked Deb if they would use it if we left it or if it'd be better for us to take it. She said they would love to use it. It was mostly construction paper, glue sticks, markers, etc. We put it all in a bag and gave it to her.

The girls were nagging us to follow them and so we did. They took us back behind a neighboring abandoned trailer and into the woods where they had a well constructed teepee shaped fort. We went inside with them and they showed us all the pots, pans, bricks, and other objects they had collected and what they used them for. Then they showed us a spot in a tree where someone had nailed some boards to make a seat. They insisted that Anna and I climb up into the seat. We did. It reminded me of my own childhood, playing in the woods, pretending bricks were a stove in a handmade wooden fort. They even had a tiny Christmas tree they had dragged over. I'm sure they could have told us about it for at least an hour, but we had to go so we headed back.

Saying goodbye was sad, but not final. I am hopeful that I can get this project on the calendar in the fall.

Things I would improve:

1. More time. By the third week when we really connected and were all comfortable and started to feel like one cohesive group, we were halfway done. Optimally, that would only be the beginning. Next time it needs to be at least 8 weeks.

Things I think went well:

1. They showed us their fort! It felt special to me that they wanted to let us in on their neighborhood secret.
2. Gabriela read! The very first week, she had marked her survey saying she did not like to read aloud. There she was by the last week, confidently volunteering to read aloud without coercion.
3. The boys came back! I don't know why, but I was glad they jumped on board with the craft project. Jonathan told me he had stopped coming a while ago because he had finished the book already.